

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books  
for Racism and Sexism  
*from The Council on Interracial Books for Children*

Both in school and out children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes - expressed over and over in books and other media - gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for a librarian or teacher to convince children to question society's attitudes. But if a child can be shown how to detect racism and sexism in a book, the child can proceed to transfer the perception to wider areas. The following ten guidelines are offered as a starting point in evaluation children's books from this perspective.

### **1. Check the Illustrations**

**Look for Stereotypes.** A stereotype is an over-simplified generalization about a particular group, race or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications. Some infamous (overt) stereotypes of blacks are the happy-go-lucky, watermelon-eating Sambo and the fat, eye-rolling "mammy"; of Chicanos, the sombrero-wearing peon or fiesta-loving, macho bandito; of Asian Americans, the inscrutable, slant-eyed "Oriental"; of Native Americans, the naked savage or "primitive brave" and his "squaw"; of Puerto Ricans, the switchblade-toting teenage gang member; of women, the completely domesticated mother, the demure, doll-loving little girl or the wicked stepmother. While you may not always find stereotypes in the blatant forms described, look for variations which in any way demean or ridicule characters because of their race or sex.

**Look for Tokenism.** If there are racial minority characters in the illustrations, do they look just like whites except for being tinted or colored in? Do all minority faces look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?

**Who's Doing What?** Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active "doers" and females the inactive observers?

### **2. Check the Story Line**

Liberation movements have led publishers to weed out many insulting passages, particularly from stories with Black themes and from books depicting female characters; however, racist and sexist attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways. The following checklist suggests some of the subtle (covert) form of bias to watch for.

**Standards for Success.** Does it take "white" behavior standards for a minority person to "get ahead"? Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do persons of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities - excel in sports, get As, etc.? In friendships between white and non-white children, is it the child of color who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

**Resolution of Problems.** How are problems presented, conceived and resolved in the story? Are minority people considered to be "the problem"? Are the oppressions faced by minorities and women represented as related to social injustice? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a racial minority person or female resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person or male?

**Role of Women.** Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their good looks or to their relationship with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

### **3. Look at the Lifestyles**

Are minority persons and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the minority group in question is depicted as "different", are negative value judgments implied? Are minorities depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text attempt to depict another culture, do they go beyond over-simplifications and offer genuine insight into another lifestyle? Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of other cultures. Watch for instances of the "quaint-natives-in-costume" syndrome (most noticeable in areas like clothing and custom, but extending to behavior and personality traits as well).

### **4. Weigh the Relationships Between People**

Do the whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do racial minorities and females of all races function in essentially supporting roles?

How are family relationships depicted? In Black families, is the mother always dominant? In Hispanic families, are there always lots of children? If the family is separated, are societal conditions - unemployment, poverty, for example - cited among the reasons for the separation?

### **5. Note the Heroes**

For many years, books showed only "safe" minority heroes - those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. Minority groups today are insisting on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice.

When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: "Whose interest is a particular hero really serving?"

## **6. Consider the Effect on a Child's Self-Image**

Are norms established which limit any child's aspirations and self-concept? What effect can it have on images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc., and the color black as evil, dirty, menacing, etc.? Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive association with the color white and negative association with black?

What happens to a girl's self-image when she reads that boys perform all of the brave and important deeds? What about a girl's self-esteem if she is not "fair" of skin and slim of body?

In a particular story, is there one or more persons with whom a minority child can readily identify to a positive and constructive end?

## **7. Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Background**

Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a minority theme, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author and illustrator are not members of the minority being written about, is there anything in their background that would specifically recommend them as the creators of this book?

## **8. Check Out the Author's Perspective**

No author can be wholly objective. All authors write out of a cultural, as well as a personal context. Children's books in the past have traditionally come from authors who were white and who were members of the middle class, with one result being that a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated children's literature in the United States. With any book in question, read carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his/her written work. Is the perspective patriarchal or feminist? Is it solely eurocentric, or do minority cultural perspectives also appear?

## **9. Watch for Loaded Words**

A word is loaded when it has insulting overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) are "savage," "primitive," "lazy," "superstitious," "treacherous," "wily," "crafty," "inscrutable," "docile," and "backward".

Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. While the generic use of the word "man" was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: ancestors instead of forefathers; chairperson instead of chairman; community instead of brotherhood; firefighters instead of firemen; manufactured instead of manmade; the human family instead of the family of man.

## **10. Look at the Copyright Date**

Books on minority themes - usually hastily conceived - suddenly began appearing in the mid-1960s. There followed a growing number of 'minority experience' books to meet the new market demand, but most of these were still written by the white authors, edited by white editors and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Not until the early 1970s has the children's book world begun to even remotely reflect the realities of a multiracial society. The new direction resulted from the emergence of minority authors writing about their own experiences. Unfortunately, this trend has been reversing, as publishers have cut back on such books. Non-sexist books, with rare exceptions, were not published before 1973.

The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, although a recent copyright date, of course, is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published. It usually takes about two years from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is actually printed and put on the market. This time lag meant very little in the past, but in a time of rapid change and changing consciousness, when children's book publishing is attempting to be "relevant," it is becoming increasingly significant.